

JESUS

and the Disinherited

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Howard Thurman

Foreword by Vincent Harding

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Love

THE religion of Jesus makes the love-ethic central. This is no ordinary achievement. It seems clear that Jesus started out with the simple teaching concerning love embodied in the timeless words of Israel: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord: and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might," and "thy neighbour as thyself." Once the neighbor is defined, then one's moral obligation is clear. In a memorable story Jesus defined the neighbor by telling of the Good Samaritan. With sure artistry and great power he depicted what happens when a man responds directly to human need across the barriers of class, race, and condition. Every man is potentially every other man's neighbor. Neighborliness is nonspatial; it is qualitative. A man must love his neighbor directly, clearly, permitting no barriers between.

This was not an easy position for Jesus to take within his own community. Opposition to his teaching increased

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as the days passed. A twofold demand was made upon him at all times: to love those of the household of Israel who became his enemies because they regarded him as a careless perverter of the truths of God; to love those beyond the household of Israel—the Samaritan, and even the Roman.

The former demand was deeply dramatized by the fact that Jesus did not consider himself as one who stood outside of Israel. If he had regarded himself as one who was starting a new religion, a new faith, then it would not have been hard to account for bitter opposition. With justice, the defenders of the faith could have opposed him because he would have been deliberately trying to destroy the very grounds of Judaism. But if it be true—as I think it is—that Jesus felt he was merely serving as a creative vehicle for the authentic genius of Israel, completely devoted to the will of God, then in order to love those of the household he must conquer his own pride. In their attitude he seemed to see the profoundest betrayal of the purpose of God. It is curious that as each looked on the other the accusations were identical.

In the second place, Jesus had to deal with the Samaritans in working out the application of his love-ethic. His solution of this bitter problem is found in the story of the Good Samaritan. There is also the very instructive account of the interview between Jesus and the Syrophenician woman.

Opposition to the interpretation which Jesus was giving to the gospel of God had increased, and Jesus and his disciples withdrew from active work into temporary semi-retirement around Tyre and Sidon. The woman broke into

his retreat with an urgent request in behalf of her child. Jesus said to her, "It is not meet to take the children's bread, and cast it to dogs." This was more a probing query than an affirmation. It had in it all the deep frustration which he had experienced, and there flashed through it generations of religious exclusiveness to which he was heir. "What right has this woman of another race to make a claim upon me? What mockery is there here? Am I not humiliated enough in being misunderstood by my own kind? And here this woman dares to demand that which, in the very nature of the case, she cannot claim as her due."

Into the riotous thoughts that were surging in his mind her voice struck like a bolt of lightning: "Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table."

"Go—go, woman, go in peace; your faith hath saved you."

But this was not all. Jesus had to apply his love-ethic to the enemy—to the Roman, the ruler. This was the hardest task, because to tamper with the enemy was to court disaster. To hate him in any way that caused action was to invite the wrath of Rome. To love him was to be regarded as a traitor to Jesus' own people, to Israel, and therefore to God. As was suggested in the first chapter, it was upon the anvil of the Jewish community's relations with Rome that Jesus hammered out the vital content of his concept of love for one's enemy.

"The enemy" can very easily be divided into three groups. There is first the personal enemy, one who is in

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some sense a part of one's primary-group life. The relationship with such a person is grounded in more or less intimate, personal associations into which has entered conflict. Such conflict may have resulted from misunderstanding or from harsh words growing out of a hot temper and too much pride on either side to make amends. It may have come about because of an old family feud by which those who were never a part of the original rift are victimized. The strained relationship may have been due to the evil work of a vicious tongue. The point is that the enemy in this sense is one who at some time was a rather intimate part of one's world and was close enough to be taken into account in terms of intimacy.

To love such an enemy requires reconciliation, the will to re-establish a relationship. It involves confession of error and a seeking to be restored to one's former place. Doubtless it is this that Jesus had in mind in his charge: "If thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar, . . . and go be reconciled to thy brother and then come and offer thy gift."

It is with this kind of enemy that the disinherited find it easiest to deal. They accept with good grace the insistence of Jesus that they deal with the rifts in their own world. Here, they are at the center; they count specifically, and their wills are crucial. When one analyzes the preaching and the religious teachings in the churches of his country, he discovers that the term "enemy" usually has this rather restricted meaning. When the Negro accepts the teaching of

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love, it is this narrow interpretation which is uppermost. I grew up with this interpretation. I dare to say that, in the white churches in my little town, the youths were trained in the same narrow interpretation applied to white persons. Love those who have a natural claim upon you. To those who have no such claim, there is no responsibility.

The second kind of enemy comprises those persons who, by their activities, make it difficult for the group to live without shame and humiliation. It does not require much imagination to assume that to the sensitive son of Israel the taxgatherers were in that class. It was they who became the grasping hand of Roman authority, filching from Israel the taxes which helped to keep alive the oppression of the gentile ruler. They were Israelites who understood the psychology of the people, and therefore were always able to function with the kind of spiritual ruthlessness that would have been impossible for those who did not know the people intimately. They were despised; they were outcasts, because from the inside they had unlocked the door to the enemy. The situation was all the more difficult to bear because the tax collectors tended to be prosperous in contrast with the rest of the people. To be required to love such a person was the final insult. How could such a demand be made? One did not even associate with such creatures. To be seen in their company meant a complete loss of status and respect in the community. The taxgatherer had no soul; he had long since lost it. When Jesus became a friend to the tax collectors and secured one as his intimate companion, it

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was a spiritual triumph of such staggering proportions that after nineteen hundred years it defies rational explanation.

The argument for loving this second enemy was the fact that he too was a son of Abraham. He was one of them, unworthy though he was. Here was the so-called call of blood, which cannot be stilled. God required that Israel be one people, even as he was one.

All underprivileged people have to deal with this kind of enemy. There are always those who seem to be willing to put their special knowledge at the disposal of the dominant group to facilitate the tightening of the chains. They are given position, often prominence, and above all a guarantee of economic security and status. To love such people requires the uprooting of the bitterness of betrayal, the heartiest poison that grows in the human spirit. There must be some understanding of how such people become as they are. Is it because they are weak and must build their strength by feeding upon the misery of their fellows? Is it because they want power and, recognizing the fact that they can never compete within the group for a place of significance, are thus driven by some strange inner urge to get by cunning what they cannot secure by integrity? Is it because they resent the circumstances of their birth and fling their defiance into the teeth of life by making everything foul and unclean within the reach of their contact and power?

There is no simple or single answer. In every ghetto, in every dwelling place of the disinherited throughout the ages, these persons have appeared. To love them means to recognize some deep respect and reverence for their persons.

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But to love them does not mean to condone their way of life.

Jesus demonstrated that the only way to redeem them for the common cause was to penetrate their thick resistance to public opinion and esteem and lay bare the simple heart. This man is not just a tax collector; he is a son of God. Awaken that awareness in him and he will attack his betrayal as only he can—from the inside. It was out of this struggle and triumph that Jesus says: "Love your enemies, do good to them which hate you." Hence he called Matthew, the tax collector, to follow him.

The third type of enemy was exemplified by Rome. The elements at work here were both personal and impersonal; they were religious and political. To deal with Rome as a moral enemy required a spiritual recognition of the relationship with the empire. This was made even more precarious because of the development of the cult of emperor worship. But Rome was the political enemy. To love the Roman meant first to lift him out of the general classification of enemy. The Roman had to emerge as a person.

On the surface this would not be too difficult. The basic requirement was that the particular Roman be established in some primary, face-to-face relationship of gross equality. There had to be a moment when the Roman and the Jew emerged as neither Roman nor Jew, but as two human spirits that had found a mutual, though individual, validation. For the most part, such an experience would be impossible as long as either was functioning only within his own social context. The Roman, viewed against the back-

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ground of his nation and its power, was endowed in the mind of the Jew with all the arrogance and power of the dominant group. It would matter not how much the individual wished to be regarded for himself alone or to be permitted to disassociate himself from all the entangling embarrassments of his birthright; the fact remained always present. He was a Roman and had to bear on his shoulders the full weight of that responsibility. If he tried to make common cause with the Jew, he was constantly under suspicion, and was never to be trusted and taken all the way into the confidence of the other.

Of course, the Jewish person was under the same handicap. It was almost impossible for him to emerge as a person; always in the background was the fact of difference and the disadvantage of status. If he wanted to know the Roman for himself, he ran the risk of being accused by his fellows of consorting with the enemy. If he persisted, it would be simply a matter of time before he would be regarded as an enemy and forced to take the consequences. The more he explained his motives, the deep ethical and spiritual urgency which forced the irregular behavior, the more hypocritical he would seem.

Once isolation from one's fellows has been achieved, one is at the mercy of doubts, fears, and confusion. One might say, "Suppose I have misread the will of God. Suppose I am really acting in this way because I do not have the courage to hate. Suppose those I am learning to love turn and rend me with added contempt and condescension. Then what? Does it mean that God has failed me? Does it mean

that there is, at long last, no ultimate integrity in the ethical enterprise? Does it mean that the love ideal is so absolute that it vitiates something as frail and limited as human life—that thus it is an evil and not a good? ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ ”

Love of the enemy means that a fundamental attack must first be made on the enemy status. How can this be done? Does it mean merely ignoring the fact that he belongs to the enemy class? Hardly. For lack of a better term, an “unscrambling” process is required. Obviously a situation has to be set up in which it is possible for primary contacts to be multiplied. By this I do not mean contacts that are determined by status or by social distinctions. There are always primary contacts between the weak and the strong, the privileged and the underprivileged, but they are generally contacts within zones of agreement which leave the status of the individual intact. There is great intimacy between whites and Negroes, but it is usually between servant and served, between employer and employee. Once the status of each is frozen or fixed, contacts are merely truces between enemies—a kind of armistice for purposes of economic security. True, there are times when something great and dependable emerges, and the miracle takes place even though the status has remained, formally. But during such moments status is merely transcended; it is not broken down. If it is transcended over a time interval of sufficient duration, a permanent emergence takes place. But, in a very tragic sense, the ultimate fate of the relationship seems to be in the hands of the wider social context.

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It is necessary, therefore, for the privileged and the underprivileged to work on the common environment for the purpose of providing normal experiences of fellowship. This is one very important reason for the insistence that segregation is a complete ethical and moral evil. Whatever it may do for those who dwell on either side of the wall, one thing is certain: it poisons all normal contacts of those persons involved. The first step toward love is a common sharing of a sense of mutual worth and value. This cannot be discovered in a vacuum or in a series of artificial or hypothetical relationships. It has to be in a real situation, natural, free.

The experience of the common worship of God is such a moment. It is in this connection that American Christianity has betrayed the religion of Jesus almost beyond redemption. Churches have been established for the underprivileged, for the weak, for the poor, on the theory that they prefer to be among themselves. Churches have been established for the Chinese, the Japanese, the Korean, the Mexican, the Filipino, the Italian, and the Negro, with the same theory in mind. The result is that in the one place in which normal, free contacts might be most naturally established—in which the relations of the individual to his God should take priority over conditions of class, race, power, status, wealth, or the like—this place is one of the chief instruments for guaranteeing barriers.

It is in order to quote these paragraphs from a recently published book, *The Protestant Church and the Negro*, by Frank S. Loescher:

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There are approximately 8,000,000 Protestant Negroes. About 7,500,000 are in separate Negro denominations. Therefore, from the local church through the regional organizations to the national assemblies over 93 per cent of the Negroes are without association in work and worship with Christians of other races except in interdenominational organizations which involves a few of their leaders. The remaining 500,000 Negro Protestants—about 6 per cent—are in predominantly white denominations, and of these 500,000 Negroes in “white” churches, at least 99 per cent, judging by the surveys of six denominations, are in segregated congregations. They are in association with their white denominational brothers only in national assemblies, and, in some denominations, in regional, state, or more local jurisdictional meetings. There remains a handful of Negro members in local “white” churches. How many? Call it one-tenth of one per cent of all the Negro Protestant Christians in the United States—8,000 souls—the figure is probably much too large. Whatever the figure actually is, the number of white and Negro persons who ever gather together for worship under the auspices of Protestant Christianity is almost microscopic. And where interracial worship does occur, it is, for the most part, in communities where there are only a few Negro families and where, therefore, only a few Negro individuals are available to “white” churches.

That is the over-all picture, a picture which hardly reveals the Protestant church as a dynamic agency in the integration of American Negroes into American life. Negro membership appears to be confined to less than one per cent of the local “white” churches, usually churches in small communities where but a few Negroes live and have already experienced a high degree of integration by other community institutions—communities one might add where it is unsound to establish a Negro church since Negroes are in such small numbers. It is an even

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smaller percentage of white churches in which Negroes are reported to be participating freely, or are integrated.

The same pattern appears to be true for other colored minorities, that is, Japanese, Chinese, Indians, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans. Regarding the Mexicans and Puerto Ricans, for example, a director of home missions work in a great denomination says his experience leads him to believe that "generally there is little, if any, discrimination here though in a community which has a large Mexican population it is quite true that they have their own churches."¹

The enormity of this sin cannot be easily grasped. The situation is so tragic that men of good will in all the specious classifications within our society find more cause for hope in the secular relations of life than in religion.

The religion of Jesus says to the disinherited: "Love your enemy. Take the initiative in seeking ways by which you can have the experience of a common sharing of mutual worth and value. It may be hazardous, but you must do it." For the Negro it means that he must see the individual white man in the context of a common humanity. The fact that a particular individual is white, and therefore may be regarded in some over-all sense as the racial enemy, must be faced; and opportunity must be provided, found, or created for freeing such an individual from his "white necessity." From this point on, the relationship becomes like any other primary one.

Once an attack is made on the enemy status and the individual has emerged, the underprivileged man must him-

¹ Pp. 76-78.

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self be status free. It may be argued that his sense of freedom must come first. Here I think the answer may be determined by the one who initiates the activity. But in either case love is possible only between two freed spirits. What one discovers in even a single experience in which barriers have been removed may become useful in building an over-all technique for loving one's enemy. There cannot be too great insistence on the point that we are here dealing with a discipline, a method, a technique, as over against some form of wishful thinking or simple desiring.

Once the mutual discovery is made that the privileged is a man and the underprivileged is a man, or that the Negro is a man and the white man is a man, then the normal desire to make this discovery inclusive of all brings one to grips with the necessity for working out a technique of implementation. The underprivileged man cannot get to know many people as he knows one individual, and yet he is in constant contact with many, in ways that deepen the conflict. Is there some skill which may be applied at a moment's notice that will make a difference even in the most casual relationships? Such a technique may be found in the attitude of respect for personality.

Preliminary to any discussion of the significance of this attitude, some urgent word of caution must be given. For the most part the relationship between the weak and the strong is basically amoral, or it is characterized by a facile use of the mood of "the exception." It is easy to say about a particular individual, "He is different," or, "He is excep-

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tional," and to imply that the general rule or the general attitude does not apply.

This mood of exception operates in still another way. A whole group may be regarded as an exception, and thus one is relieved of any necessity to regard them as human beings. A Negro may say: "If a man is white, he may be automatically classified as one incapable of dealing with me as if he were a rational human being." Or it may be just the reverse. Such a mood, the mood of exception, operates in all sorts of ways. A Republican may say the same thing about a Socialist. The deadly consequences of this attitude are evident. On the same principle scapegoats are provided, upon whose helpless heads we pour our failures and our fears.

The attitude of respect for personality presupposes that all the individuals involved are within what may be called the ethical field. The privileged man must be regarded as being within the area in which ethical considerations are mandatory. If either privileged or underprivileged is out of bounds, the point has no validity.

It is important now to ask how Jesus used this attitude. How did he spell it out? One day a Roman captain came to him seeking help for his servant, for whom he had a profound attachment—a Roman citizen seeking help from a Jewish teacher! Deep was his anguish and distress; all other sources of help had failed. That which would have been expected in the attitude of the Roman growing out of the disjointed relationship between them and the Jews

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was conspicuously lacking here. The fact that he had come to Jesus was in itself evidence to warrant the conclusion that he had put aside the pride of race and status which would have caused him to regard himself as superior to Jesus. He placed his need directly and simply before Jesus, saying, "Lord, my servant lieth at home sick of the palsy, grievously tormented." By implication he says, "It is my faith that speaks, that cries out. I am stripped bare of all pretense and false pride. The man in me appeals to the man in you." So great was his faith and his humility that when Jesus said that he would come to his home, the captain replied, "I am not worthy that thou shouldest come under my roof; but speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed."

It was the testimony of Jesus that he had found no such faith in all Israel. The Roman was confronted with an insistence that made it impossible for him to remain a Roman, or even a captain. He had to take his place alongside all the rest of humanity and mingle his desires with the longing of all the desperate people of all the ages. When this happened, it was possible at once for him to scale with Jesus any height of understanding, fellowship, and love. The final barrier between the strong and the weak, between ruler and ruled, disappeared.

In the casual relationships between the privileged and the underprivileged there may not be many occurrences of so dramatic a character. Naturally. The average underprivileged man is not a Jesus of Nazareth. The fact re-

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mains, however, that wherever a need is laid bare, those who stand in the presence of it can be confronted with the experience of universality that makes all class and race distinctions impertinent. During the great Vanport, Oregon, disaster, when rising waters left thousands homeless, many people of Portland who, prior to that time were sure of their "white supremacy," opened their homes to Negroes, Mexicans, and Japanese. The result was that they were all confronted with the experience of universality. They were no longer white, black, and brown. They were men, women, and children in the presence of the operation of impersonal Nature. Under the pressure they were the human family, and each stood in immediate candidacy for the profoundest fellowship, understanding, and love.

In many experiences of the last war this primary discovery was made. Since an army is a part of the pretensions of the modern state, the state's using it to perpetuate the system of segregation is mere stupidity. The multiplication of moments when citizens—in this instance soldiers—may be confronted with an experience of universality is simply staggering. Aside from all consideration of the issues of war and peace, here is a public activity of the state in which the raw material of democracy can be fashioned into an experience of that personality confirmation without which there can be no lasting health in the state. It is not merely coincidental that this same experience is that out of which the ethical premise of love can find fulfillment.

The concept of reverence for personality, then, is applicable between persons from whom, in the initial instance,

the heavy weight of status has been sloughed off. Then what? Each person meets the other where he is and there treats him as if he were where he ought to be. Here we emerge into an area where love operates, revealing a universal characteristic unbounded by special or limited circumstances.

How did Jesus define it? One day a woman was brought to Jesus. She had been caught in the act of adultery. The spokesman for the group who brought her said she was caught red-handed and that according to the law she should be stoned to death. "What is your judgment?" was their searching question. To them the woman was not a woman, or even a person, but an adulteress, stripped of her essential dignity and worth. Said Jesus: "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone." After that, he implied, any person may throw. The quiet words exploded the situation, and in the piercing glare each man saw himself in his literal substance. In that moment each was not a judge of another's deeds, but of his own. In the same glare the adulteress saw herself merely as a woman involved in the meshes of a struggle with her own elemental passion.

Jesus, always the gentleman, did not look at the woman as she stood before him. Instead, he looked on the ground, busied himself with his thoughts. What a moment, reaching beyond time into eternity!

Jesus waited. One by one the men crept away. The woman alone was left. Hearing no outcry, Jesus raised his eyes and beheld the woman. "Where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee?"

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"No man, Lord."

"Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more."

This is how Jesus demonstrated reverence for personality. He met the woman where she was, and he treated her as if she were already where she now willed to be. In dealing with her he "believed" her into the fulfillment of her possibilities. He stirred her confidence into activity. He placed a crown over her head which for the rest of her life she would keep trying to grow tall enough to wear.

Free at last, free at last.

Thank God Almighty, I'm free at last.

The crucial question is, Can this attitude, developed in the white heat of personal encounter, become characteristic of one's behavior even when the drama of immediacy is lacking? I think so. It has to be rooted in concrete experience. No amount of good feeling for people in general, no amount of simple desiring, is an adequate substitute. It is the act of inner authority, well within the reach of everyone. Obviously, then, merely preaching love of one's enemies or exhortations—however high and holy—cannot, in the last analysis, accomplish this result. At the center of the attitude is a core of painstaking discipline, made possible only by personal triumph. The ethical demand upon the more privileged and the underprivileged is the same.

There is another aspect of the problem which is crucial for the disinherited who is seeking in his love to overcome his hatred. The disinherited man has a sense of gross in-

jury. He finds it well-nigh impossible to forgive, because his injury is often gratuitous. It is not for something that he has done, an action resulting from a deliberate violation of another. He is penalized for what he *is* in the eyes and the standards of another. Somehow he must free himself of the will to retaliation that keeps alive his hatred. Years ago I heard an American missionary to Arabia make a speech concerning the attitude of the people in that land toward the British. He said that he and an Arab friend were taking a boat ride down a certain river when a British yacht passed. With quiet fury the Arab friend said, "Damn the English."

"Why do you say that? They have done good service to your country in terms of health and so forth. I don't understand."

"I said, 'Damn the English,' because they think they are better than I am." Here was stark bitterness fed by the steady oozing of the will to resentment.

It is clear that before love can operate, there is the necessity for forgiveness of injury perpetuated against a person by a group. This is the issue for the disinherited. Once again the answer is not simple. Perhaps there is no answer that is completely satisfying from the point of view of rational reflection. Can the mouse forgive the cat for eating him? It does seem that Jesus dealt with every act of forgiveness as one who was convinced that there is in every act of injury an element that is irresponsible and irrational. No evil deed—and no good deed, either—was named by him as an expression of the total mind of the doer. Once, when someone addressed him as "Good Master," Jesus is quoted

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as having said, "Why callest thou me good? there is none good, but . . . God."

In Jesus' insistence that we should forgive seventy times seven, there seems to be the assumption that forgiveness is mandatory for three reasons. First, God forgives us again and again for what we do intentionally and unintentionally. There is present an element that is contingent upon our attitude. Forgiveness beyond this is interpreted as the work of divine grace. Second, no evil deed represents the full intent of the doer. Third, the evildoer does not go unpunished. Life is its own restraint. In the wide sweep of the ebb and flow of moral law our deeds track us down, and doer and deed meet. "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord." At the moment of injury or in the slow burning fires of resentment this may be poor comfort. This is the ultimate ground in which finally a profound, unrelieved injury is absorbed. When all other means have been exhausted, each in his own tongue whispers, "There *is* forgiveness with God."

What, then, is the word of the religion of Jesus to those who stand with their backs against the wall? There must be the clearest possible understanding of the anatomy of the issues facing them. They must recognize fear, deception, hatred, each for what it is. Once having done this, they must learn how to destroy these or to render themselves immune to their domination. In so great an undertaking it will become increasingly clear that the contradictions of life are not ultimate. The disinherited will know for themselves that there is a Spirit at work in life and in the hearts of men

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which is committed to overcoming the world. It is universal, knowing no age, no race, no culture, and no condition of men. For the privileged and underprivileged alike, if the individual puts at the disposal of the Spirit the needful dedication and discipline, he can live effectively in the chaos of the present the high destiny of a son of God.